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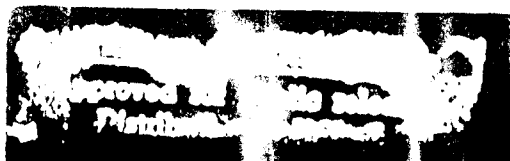
SSI Special Report

On Negotiating With Castro

Donald E. Schulz



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ON NEGOTIATING WITH CASTRO

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Donald E. Schulz

November 10, 1993

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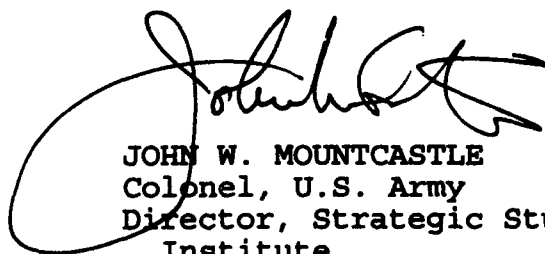
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FOREWORD

Since the publication of the Strategic Studies Institute's most recent study on Cuba last spring (The United States and Cuba: From a Strategy of Conflict to Constructive Engagement), the socioeconomic crisis in that country has accelerated. In a desperate attempt to halt the spiral, President Fidel Castro has introduced a series of economic reforms which have potentially destabilizing implications. Thus, the time has come to re-examine the shifting political equilibrium in Cuba and its implications for U.S. policy. In this brief but trenchant postscript to his previous study, Dr. Donald Schulz argues that the moment may have arrived for the United States to launch a major political initiative aimed at securing the retirement of the Castro brothers and a peaceful transition to democracy and a more open economy. The author suggests that if the United States could provide Castro with a way of salvaging his place in history, the Cuban leader might just grab the opportunity. Put simply, he has no other decent options. Hence, the need to provide him with one last chance to play his favorite role as "savior of the Cuban nation" by magnanimously sacrificing himself for the good of his people. While the strategy carries a considerable price tag, it is argued that the risks and costs would be far less than if the United States does nothing and the country explodes.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish this report as a contribution to understanding events in this important region.



JOHN W. MOUNTCASTLE
Colonel, U.S. Army
Director, Strategic Studies
Institute

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

DONALD E. SCHULZ is an Associate Research Professor of national security policy at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Political Science from Ohio State University and has taught at several universities. He has coedited two books, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Central America and the Caribbean*, and *Political Participation in Communist Systems*. His articles have appeared in *Foreign Policy*, *Orbis*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. More recently he lived in Honduras where he researched a book on *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, scheduled for publication this year by Westview Press. Currently he is editing a book on *Cuba and the Future* and another on Mexico. His most recent publication is *The United States and Cuba: From a Strategy of Conflict to Constructive Engagement* (SSI monograph, May 1993).

ON NEGOTIATING WITH CASTRO

Cuba's crisis continues to intensify. In March 1993, the island was hit by a devastating storm, which flooded Havana, crippling the country's power grid, causing extensive harm to its crops, and leaving some 150,000 people homeless. Official estimates placed the damage at around \$1 billion which, if true, amounted to nearly a tenth of the economy, or the equivalent of almost half of Cuba's imports for the previous year. Not long thereafter, reports of a mysterious epidemic began to circulate, sowing panic throughout the populace. Tens of thousands of Cubans, it seemed, were in danger of going blind, apparently due (at least in part) to Vitamin B deficiencies.¹

For two years, meat and dairy products had been a rarity for most Cubans. Milk was available mainly for children under the age of seven. Adults were receiving one egg a month from government-controlled stores. There was no beef, pork or chicken (except on the black market, if you could afford it). There were no fruits or vegetables, except for black beans, rice and lettuce. In desperation, some Cubans took to eating their pets. Indeed, Guantanamo reported a heavy infestation of banana rats, fleeing for their lives into that American-held naval base.

The passing months brought no relief. In late May, the government disclosed that the sugar harvest had fallen to around 4.28 million tons down from 7 million tons the previous year. This was the sharpest drop in output in the country's history. Moreover, a few days later the island was hit by another torrential storm. Subsequently, officials announced that Cuba would be unable to fulfill its sugar commitments to foreign clients. With little to celebrate and anxious to avoid gathering large numbers of people together, the government announced the cancellation of the traditional 26th of July rally marking the beginning of the revolution. Instead, Castro held a "simple, quiet...solemn but austere" meeting of party loyalists in Santiago's Heredia Theater, where he revealed the latest grim news about the state of the economy. (Among other things, he estimated that Cuba would be able to import only \$1.7 billion worth of goods in 1993, down from \$2.2 billion the previous year and \$8.1 billion in 1989.)²

All this had predictable social consequences. As oil and electricity became increasingly scarce, more factories and offices closed and even more people were thrown out of work. Juvenile delinquency and crime rose. Power outages stretched from 12 to 16 hours a day in the capital, reaching up to 20 hours a day in the provinces. By August, Havana was sweltering under a heat wave that left hard-to-find food spoiling in warm refrigerators and drove thousands to sleep on their rooftops in search of cool breezes. Increasingly, people took advantage of the dark of night to stage an unprecedented rash of small rebellions. Demonstrators smashed and looted state stores, hurled rocks at police cars, sprayed anti-Castro graffiti on

walls, and occasionally even clanged pots and pans in a traditional symbol of protest.

In turn, the regime intensified the repression. In one incident, several would-be refugees were shot by the Cuban coast guard, sparking a spontaneous popular protest in Cojimar. In September, the Communist Party newspaper *Granma* warned that robbery, vandalism and antigovernment behavior had reached "unacceptable" levels and that "delinquents and other antisocial elements" who tried to create disorder would receive a "crushing reply from the people."³ Shortly thereafter, it was announced that vandalism of state property--including the breaking of windows--would henceforth be considered sabotage and would be punished by 8 years in jail.

The Political Implications of Economic Reform.

Cubans were still descending into the depths. No one appeared able to say with confidence when the economy would finally bottom out. What seemed clear, however, was that misery would be the norm for the foreseeable future; moreover, that social tensions were building, perhaps to some kind of climax.

It was within this context that the government announced a daring series of reforms designed to stop the downward slide of the economy. In his annual 26th of July speech, Castro declared that from now on Cubans could legally possess and spend hard currency (essentially dollars). Beyond this, more exiles would be allowed to visit the island. These "concessions," he said, were made because of Cuba's "pressing and vital need" to stave off economic collapse.⁴

This was a courageous move, but it was also a desperate one. Economists estimated that, as a result of "dollarization," Cuban exiles might send several hundred million dollars more a year to their relatives on the island. This would certainly help, but it was hardly enough to turn the economy around. More important, the unintended side effects were potentially explosive. Among other things, they could turn the Cuban class structure on its head. Those most likely to benefit from these measures were often among the least loyal elements in the population, while regime supporters would find themselves at a severe disadvantage. Few Blacks, after all, had rich relatives in Miami. Soon, many party members and military officers might find themselves worse off than counterrevolutionary taxi drivers and plumbers. How would Castro manage the inevitable resentments that would arise?

The reforms hit at the core of the revolution's institutional and social power base. More broadly, they also raised questions about the regime's ability to control the society at large. As the country's sole employer, the government

had always been able to coerce reluctant Cubans to do its will. Now, however, it seemed probable that large numbers of workers, who were making the equivalent of only \$3 a month in their state jobs, would simply quit and join the informal economy, where their opportunities for profit were infinitely greater. All this had political, as well as economic, implications. Could the regime still make dollar-holders do "voluntary" work and attend political rallies? If the number of exiles allowed to visit the island were to be tripled (and, as of this writing, it is still unclear how many will actually be admitted), could political and social contamination be avoided? The visitors would bring with them ideas, values and information that potentially could be very destabilizing. One could not but recall that a similar influx in the late 1970s had explosive consequences: the massive flight of 125,000 Cuban refugees to the United States (mostly southern Florida) in the spring of 1980.

The immediate effect of "dollarization" was to drive up the value of U.S. currency. In an effort to check an onslaught of "dollar fever," the government increased the price of goods sold at hard-currency stores by 50 percent. At the same time, the value of the peso on the black market fell from 60 to the dollar to over 100 to the dollar. For decades, Cubans had been able to accumulate considerable savings, the result of a combination of decent salaries and a paucity of consumer goods. Now, almost overnight, those nest eggs began to disappear.

In September, moreover, the government further compounded its social and political problems when it decreed that 117 categories of workers--from barbers and mechanics to cheese makers and computer programmers--could now engage in private business. The problem was that self-employment was not extended to managers of state enterprises or, indeed, to anyone with a university degree. This meant that many professionals--including many of the regime's supporters--would not be able to take advantage of the opportunities that were opening up.

This announcement was almost immediately followed by the revelation that cooperative farms would be given more autonomy and that private citizens would be allowed to work small, unused plots of state land. Although these measures were very limited (farmers would still have to sell their crops to the state, presumably at prices determined by the latter), they represented yet another step away from a centrally controlled economy and another concession to private initiative. Inevitably, some of this produce would escape the government's hands and end up on the black market.

Towards the end of the month, the dangers inherent in the regime's new course were brought home dramatically by the separate defections of two air force pilots. In subsequent interviews, both men complained that the "dollarization" of the

economy had turned Cuban soldiers into second-class citizens and created enormous discontent within the armed forces. (Military officers, who had long been under orders to break all ties with their relatives abroad, made the equivalent of about \$5 a month. In contrast, other Cubans with relatives in Miami could now legally receive up to \$100 a month.) At the same time, there was growing resentment among the lower ranks against the generals, who were the only officers who had ready access to dollars. The question, increasingly, was whether soldiers would be willing to fire on civilians if mass disturbances broke out. Increasingly, it seemed that the answer might well be "no."

The Prospects for Stability: The Shifting Equilibrium.

Clearly, the Cuban political equation is changing in important, and potentially destabilizing, ways. The economic reforms are rapidly undermining Castro's bases of support in both the mass public and the critical institutions of the party-state. A new privileged class is being formed, composed in large part of elements which have little sympathy for the regime. At the same time, stalwarts in the Communist Party, the Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the mass organizations are, in effect, being penalized for their loyalty and sacrifice. The resulting disillusionment and bitterness cannot but raise doubt as to the Castro brothers' continuing ability to control the apparatus of repression. As of October, the prospects of a mass uprising or coup seem much greater than they had been a few months earlier.

Nor in the short run are things likely to get much better. While some of the reforms may alleviate hardships and buy some popular support, the latter will in all likelihood be very limited. Either the measures do not go far enough and thus may actually increase public frustration (the agricultural reforms and the opening of certain occupations to private enterprise) or those who benefit are already so alienated from the regime that they are not likely to feel much gratitude ("dollarization"). Beyond this, a process has been set in motion. As the months pass and traditional beneficiaries of the revolution are increasingly bypassed by the new privileged socioeconomic elite, resentment within Castro's core constituency can be expected to grow, even further undermining the regime's legitimacy.

Moreover, there are signs that a real civil society (that is, one that is independent of government control) may finally be emerging. In September, the Catholic Church took a dramatic step in the direction of opposition by issuing a strongly worded pastoral letter calling on the government to surrender its monopoly on political power and begin a national dialogue to save Cuba from social and economic collapse. The bishops were immediately denounced in the official press, but within a matter of days thousands of copies of the document were bought up by

ordinary citizens. All this strengthened the church's prestige considerably and suggested that it might become a political force to be reckoned with.

Yet, in spite of all the decay, the Cuban state remains intact. The highest political and military leaders are still privileged and still, apparently, loyal. Within the armed forces, opposition continues to be diffuse, while the omnipresent counterintelligence apparatus effectively deters organized resistance.

Furthermore, civil society is still very weak. The church has never been much of a political factor in Cuba, and it is by no means clear that it could become the center of an opposition movement, even if its leaders were willing to go that route (which they are probably not). And while the number of human rights and dissident organizations is mushrooming, the movement as a whole remains deeply divided. Most of these groups are very small and are closely watched. As always, the authorities seem intent on preempting opposition before it becomes active or effective. (In September, for instance, they launched predawn raids in Cienfuegos province, arresting dozens of people with a "high social risk index." Others with "flawed behavior" were merely given a warning.) The upshot is that, although dissident activity has risen sharply, the society as a whole remains atomized, demoralized, and passive.⁵

Under these circumstances, the regime might survive for some time. Summer is now over, the heat has subsided, and demands on electricity and petroleum are declining. Cuba's external economic shock seems to have run its course. Unfavorable commodity price swings have begun to improve. Nickel production is due to increase. Economic reforms are being implemented to attract foreign investment and improve economic efficiency. The Russians have agreed to guarantee fuel, fertilizers, and spare parts for the coming harvest and to import at least 2 million tons of sugar. (In addition, they pledged to provide \$350 million in credits for Cuban oil, nuclear energy, and nickel-mining projects that the former Soviet Union had supported.) It seems unlikely that the island will soon be hit by more storms of the severity of those with which it has been plagued during the past year. (Cuba's luck has to change sometime.) There is therefore considerable reason to believe that the economy is in the process of finally bottoming out.⁶

But if Castro might yet outlast the crisis, it seems equally likely that, sooner or later, he will go down in flames. As of November, one can only wait in anticipation of the long, hot summer of 1994.

On Negotiating with Castro.

In the face of Cuba's spiralling disintegration, U.S. policy has rapidly been overtaken by events. To be fair, the Clinton administration has shown a willingness to change some of the most obviously counterproductive aspects of that policy. Official rhetoric has been lowered. The Commerce Department has approved a number of large, one-time shipments of medical supplies and other goods by private U.S. groups. Some travel restrictions have been eased. American doctors have visited the island to advise their Cuban counterparts on the epidemic of blindness. On a couple of occasions, Havana has been notified in advance of U.S. military maneuvers in the region. The two sides have begun to cooperate on such matters as counternarcotics and the repatriation of Cuban-born prisoners being held in U.S. jails for crimes committed since the 1980 Mariel boatlift. With Washington's blessing, Sprint, M.C.I., and A.T. and T. have gone to Havana to negotiate increased telephone services. Warnings have been issued that anyone attempting to launch armed attacks against Cuba would be subject to legal penalties. A few arrests have even been made.

These are substantial changes, but they are simply not enough. Cuba's socioeconomic and political crises are deepening so quickly that the Clinton administration has to run ever more rapidly just to stay even. Increasingly, this is a losing race. Part of the problem is that the United States, having altered its tactics, has not yet developed a coherent policy. What it has, rather, is a policy that is being torn asunder by conflicting factions. On the one hand, there are those who want to soften the traditional approach, the better to open up the island to outside influences. On the other, there are those who are determined to continue isolating and pressuring the regime in the hope that at some point it will crack and shatter. The upshot has been a contradictory policy that has further weakened Castro without allowing him a way out of the crisis in which he, as well as his countrymen, are trapped. The result is likely to be either more repression and hardship or a further loss of control that could plunge the island into chaos and perhaps civil war.

The trick, for both the Cubans and the United States, is to find a way of making a peaceful transition possible. Clearly, the political and socioeconomic dimensions of the problem are inextricably related. The formula is very simple: (1) As long as the United States is unwilling to normalize relations, Cuba will not be able to gain the resources (from the U.S. government; the Miamians; private companies, banks and investors; international lending agencies) to repair its shattered economy and society. (2) As long as the Castros remain in power, that change in American policy will not occur. If the Castrophobes can no longer dictate U.S. policy in its entirety, they can still exercise veto power over its core components. (3) Therefore,

Fidel and Raul have to go. This is the minimal requirement for the deadlock to be broken.

But how is that possible? After all, power and grandeur have always been the central motivating forces in Castroism.⁷ Would Fidel ever give up power voluntarily?

Perhaps. One must understand that this is a man who has no good options. His purgatory is to witness the destruction of everything that he has created in his 35 years in power. He is an historical anachronism, and he knows it. He is also old, sick, tired, and probably quite depressed, if one can judge by his own words. ("I will be a sigh in history.")⁸ For the first time, we have an opportunity to exploit a split that may be occurring within Castro's own psyche between the compulsion for power and the compulsion for grandeur. Put simply, if Castro clings to power, his aspirations for historical greatness will disappear as Cuba continues to disintegrate and he has to accept the lion's share of the blame. Given this stark reality, if he were to be made the right offer--one that would enable him to salvage his place in history--he might just take it.

In short, the time has come to take up Castro on his recent proposals to step down in return for a lifting of the U.S. embargo on Cuba. ("If I were the obstacle, I would be willing to give up not only my positions and responsibilities, but even my life.")⁹ Towards that end, exploratory talks should be initiated. They should be held in strict secrecy, with a view toward providing an honorable exit for both Fidel and his brother, Raul.

The principle of an "honorable exit" is crucial. As John Kennedy understood so well during the Missile Crisis, one should not back a foe into a corner unless one really wants to fight. Castro must be given a way of escaping from the trap in which he is ensnared. We must remember that this is a man who sees everything through the prism of his own ego. He undoubtedly continues to believe, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that the Cuban people need him in this time of grave national crisis. As matters now stand, he cannot leave without seeming to "desert" them. Thus, the trick will be to give him a way to redefine his options so as to enable him to perform "one final service for Cuba." If this is done right, we may be able to offer him a last chance to play his favorite role as "savior of the nation" by magnanimously sacrificing himself for the good of his people. Given his obsession with his place in history and his current lack of viable alternatives, he just might buy the idea.

Such a solution would, of course, require the Clinton administration to haul itself out of the bind in which it presently finds itself and take the initiative. This may not be

easy. There will be those who will not want to give Castro even a fig leaf, and the policy set forth here would give him much more. In effect, he would become a collaborator in and beneficiary of this strategy. One should simply ask whether the alternatives--continuing repression and/or massive bloodshed, with the possible flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees to southern Florida--would be preferable. Nor should the possibility of a U.S. military intervention be discounted. If Cuba descends into civil war, there will be crises in Congress and the Cuban community to "do something." If we fall prey to that temptation, the costs could be enormous.

The details of such a settlement have only just begun to be seriously explored. A suitable place of exile would have to be found for the Castro brothers. Plans would have to be made for a political and economic transition. In this process, Washington must resist the temptation to be heavy handed. Cuba is a sovereign country, and a solution cannot be unilaterally imposed. While a settlement will have to involve several parties, both in Cuba and the United States, the role of the Cuban Cubans must be central. One cannot expect the current elite to negotiate its own destruction. Nor can we expect it to allow the "Miamians" to return to the island as conquering heroes. If we want a peaceful transition, we must be ready to work with many of Cuba's present leaders to promote a change to political democracy and a more open (though not necessarily a full-scale free-market) economy. Although we can certainly help--and here the role of the Cuban American community will be crucial--in the final analysis it must be the islanders themselves who determine the fate of Cuba.

Finally--and this is the bottom line--the United States must be generous. In addition to trade, Cuba will need massive economic and humanitarian aid and investment. While the bulk of this will have to come from private sources (especially in Miami) and international lending agencies like the IMF, the World Bank, and the Interamerican Development Bank, some will also have to come from the U.S. Government. (Among other things, U.S. citizens will have to be at least partially compensated for the loss of properties nationalized by Castro, and a post-Castro government will simply not have the resources to do that.) What is needed is a Marshall Plan for Cuba, internationally organized and funded, with a direct U.S. contribution on the order of a half billion to a billion dollars a year for at least 5 years.¹⁰

Again, there will be those who will resist that kind of a commitment. Times are tough, and foreign aid unpopular. Nevertheless, one must operate in the world of reality. Cuba is a time bomb, and unless it is defused it is likely to sooner or later explode. Under such circumstances, it would be incredibly short-sided to be niggardly. There may now be a possibility of getting rid of Castro and effecting a peaceful transition to a

democratic and prosperous Cuba. But how long that opening will exist, no one can tell. We must seize the day.

In the end, of course, much will depend on Castro himself. The compulsion for power may very well prove too strong for him to accept even this kind of an offer. But then, at least, we will have tried to defuse the crisis, and the responsibility for Cuba's agony can be placed squarely on his shoulders. That is where it belongs.

ENDNOTES

1. By September, the illness seemed to have subsided after having impaired the vision and damaged the nerves of nearly 51,000 people. The cause was still unknown. The most likely explanation was probably a combination of a nutritional deficiency and some other unknown factor, most likely toxic.

2. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), Daily Report: Latin America, July 27, 1993.

3. Mimi Whitefield, "Cuba Promises 'Crushing Reply' to Disorder," Miami Herald, September 9, 1993.

4. FBIS, Daily Report: Latin America, July 27, 1993.

5. For a comprehensive analysis of the sources of Castro's staying power, see Donald E. Schulz, "Can Castro Survive?" Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 89-117.

6. See Andrew Zimbalist, "Dateline Cuba: Hanging on in Havana," Foreign Policy, No. 92, Fall 1993, pp. 162-164. Even so, the prospects for the coming year are still dismal. On top of everything else, the government has announced that fuel shortages and a lack of rain in some areas have seriously impeded planting and weeding for the sugar harvest.

7. This is not to deny the importance of ideology in Castroism. But ideology has been primarily a dependent, rather than an independent variable in the equation. It is the vehicle through which power and grandeur have been expressed. For a detailed analysis, see Donald E. Schulz, "The Cuban Revolution and the Soviet Union" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1977), volume one.

8. FBIS, Daily Report: Latin America, September 8, 1992. A number of recent observers have commented on his chalky complexion and tired appearance. There have been rumors of a heart condition and cancer, but no hard information has emerged. On the advice of his doctor, he has given up smoking cigars.

9. Miami Herald, March 5, 1993; see also FBIS, Daily Report: Latin America, March 11, 1993.

10. More exact amounts are hard to estimate, since they will have to be coordinated with other donations. A recent study by Ernest Preeg suggested that only about \$300 million in U.S. economic aid would be needed during the peak year in the 5-year period. But this does not include humanitarian aid or official credit from the Export-Import Bank and the Commodity Credit Corporation. The study, moreover, is based on some very

optimistic assumptions (about political conditions, for instance). See Ernest H. Preeg (with Jonathan D. Levine), Cuba and the New Caribbean Economic Order, Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies.